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"THE LADIES, GOD BLESS THEM."—A. J. MARKS

→ JANET. ←

BY MRS. OLIPHANT.



"IF SHE dies what is to become of the little girl?"
"What becomes of most little girls for whom their parents make no provision. She must either marry or go for a governess."

"It is easy to talk of either alternative. Who is she to marry? There is not a marriageable man in Clover except the old Squire. And as for governesses—they are wanted now on quite a different level from what used to be. They are wanted with degrees, diplomas, and I don't know all that."

"Oh," said the other speaker, "there are just as many incapables employed as ever there were, and men turn up to marry the girls foredoomed to that existence in the unlikeliest places. In human affairs we must always make allowance for the never-ascertainable action of Chance."

"I call it by another name, and think better of it," said the old Vicar, with a smile.

"It's very lucky for you that you can do so. You have much the best of it, I acknowledge. But whatever we call it, it is true."

"Well, we'll hope for little Janet—"

"Oh, this is a case in point," said the Doctor; "wherever that girl is, you will see marriageable men will turn up. I don't say it is any fault of hers, poor little thing. She can't help it. She makes little eyes at me, though I might be—her grandfather."

"Come, come, Doctor; I left you out because you are so persistent a bachelor; and I can't realize you as affected by the charms of Janet, whom you have seen through the measles and all that, which must take off the romance; but you are the marriageable man of the parish, and so the ladies all know."

"The romantic man, too, I suppose," said the grim celibate addressed. He added more gravely, "You are going to see the patient, I suppose—to try what your medicaments will do."

"They are not mad," said the Vicar, "patience, faith, a little forgetfulness of self."

"If you get her to accept them you will be a much better doctor than I."

The old Parson did not look very hopeful. He shook his head; but he said, "We can never tell. Moral miracles at least, you must admit, happen every day."

"Conversions to wit? I've heard of them," said Dr. Harding, and with a hasty grasp of the old clergyman's hand he walked off in the opposite direction. He was spare, well-brushed man of fifty-five, looking an embodiment of practical use, help, and absence of sentiment. Nobody could be more intent upon relieving suffering; but nobody had, so far as appeared, less sympathy with the sufferers. He told them it was the natural consequence of their own or their parents' misdeemours, and that it was no use making a fuss about what couldn't be helped, and that they might be glad it was no worse, and that they must grin and bear it, with other things of the kind little agreeable to the patient. Naturally he was not popular at first, though much trusted by the rustic population; but after a while they began to accept this as the Doctor's way. It is, was, always allowed that a doctor might be rude and arbitrary by right of his profession—the greater he was the more rude. And the parish accordingly highly regarded and honoured, though it was not fond of, its medical director.

But the Vicar was as gentle as the Doctor was rough. He had been Vicar of Clover since before the memory of man, had christened everybody, married everybody, or almost everybody, in the parish. He was a sort of second, and supplementary father to the whole population. When the real father did not do his duty, it was the Vicar who was looked to by everybody to perform it, and even when there was no failure in that natural office there were still a hundred references to Mr. Bland. He kept a kind of registry for servants, or, at least, his wife did, and found places for the girls; and sometimes he apprenticed the boys out of his own pocket, arguing father and mother out of the fashionable objection to that salutary servitude, for fashion is just as strong among the cottagers as it is in Belgravia. So long as the Vicar lived, however, the old fashion, the customs of earlier and sturdier generations, would never be allowed to die.

The Vicar took his way to Rose Cottage while the Doctor turned his back upon it. It was quite true, as Dr. Harding said, that Mr. Bland was about to try his medicaments on the mistress of that forlorn little pretty house, his colleague having failed. Rose Cottage was very small to be a house fully recognised as belonging to the gentry of the place, but it was very pretty, surrounded and garlanded by roses and really deserving its name, as so few prettily-named cottages do. Its south side was wrapped in the beautiful yellow mantle of a Marechal Niel. The porch was covered with Devonia. Roses red and roses white hung, mixed with passion flower and clematis, about the rest of the house, and filled the tiny trim garden. It was like one big bouquet of roses, from its little green gate to the red chimneys, which were almost the only uncovered part of the building. In summer time it was a beautiful object which visitors used to peep at over the trim privet hedge; in winter it was not so pretty; but as it was favourably placed for the sunshine it was always bright. In this house, which was just big enough to hold them, dwelt two little ladies with two maids. The mistress of the house was one of the many elderly gentlewomen with small but steady and assured incomes who abound in England, and who find pretty houses in many a Clover in which to spend long, uneventful, but on the whole happy, lives, unre troubled by any external care. The lady of Rose Cottage had never married; she had few near relations, and nobody to be responsible to for anything she did, and accordingly she had taken, unquestioned by any except her neighbours, a number of years before, a step a little out of the ordinary way which complicated matters very much now that she was on what seemed her deathbed: she had adopted a child. The child was more or less of her own blood, the orphan daughter of a cousin who had been the favourite companion of her youth, and though the village shook its head at the proceeding, and declared that such romantic measures never turned out well, yet there really seemed nothing against the step except its unusual character. It was unusual: and people who had no inclination to take any trouble for their fellow creatures were fond of saying that they individually would not have ventured to take such a responsibility. On the other hand, some warmer spirits asked with indignation, Why should it be unusual? Surely it was the highest form of charity—and is not charity ever blessed? Indeed there were few real objections against it which would stand examination, except, perhaps, that it was undertaken rather for the amusement and pleasure of the generous lady than for the advantage of the little girl. Miss Philipson thought that a child would be a delightful plaything, and that to pet her, and dress her, and lead her about would be far more entertaining than the most delightful of lapdogs or the sleekest of cats. That the little girl would ever arrive at an age when she must be treated like a woman did not occur to anyone when she was a little forlorn creature of seven; but gradually the time had flitted by and Janet was now nineteen. She had been very much petted, dressed, and played with all her life. She had been much better than a lapdog. She had been a living doll upon whom her benefactress experimented in every kind of costume and adornment. Janet's little frocks, her pinwafers, her hats, had become the models of the village. Miss Philipson had got all the new patterns of children's things and had herself worked at them (being very fond of needlework) with unwearied devotion. When she saw other ladies working (as village ladies will) at fancy-work for bazaars or other such vanities, she had all the superiority over them of a mother. "It takes me all my time to keep my Janet going," she said. "Janet is a lucky child," some of the ladies would say: but others shook their heads and declared that Miss Philipson was spoiling Janet, dressing her up as not another child, high or low, was dressed.

Janet was very well adapted for the position into which she had been thrown. She was a pretty little girl with those soft, caressing manners and guileless looks which are so attractive. She was not shy, but hung on her Aunt Mary, which was the name by which Miss Philipson liked to be called, with a twining of small arms and an offering of small kisses which were sweet to the lonely woman. She lent herself to all the dressings up with a native taste for adornment, and a native pleasure in being fine, never complaining of the horrors of "trying on," nor growing impatient of the fittings and changes. And thus she lived, with the prettiest frocks, the pleasantest life, of any girl about, petted and praised and taken to all sorts of simple festivities—with sweetmeats and sashes and little tea-parties, and when she grew old enough all the little dances that were to be had in the neighbourhood of Dinglefield, making her existence pleasant—an exceptional existence in every way. She knew nothing to trouble the calm of her youth, not even those little cross-tempers and accidents that break the peace of a family, the anxieties about brothers abroad in the world or sisters sick or sorry. Nothing of the kind ever intruded into the cottage, where there were no disturb-

ing elements, so offending members to watch over and plead for, no father to be kept in good humour. Aunt Mary was sometimes ill, and sometimes she would scold and make remarks upon Janet's peculiarities; but Janet was gifted by Nature with a tolerant temper and the faculty of holding her tongue, and every such little storm blew over. And thus she came to her nineteenth year. Many people thought she was spoilt, many that she had escaped spoiling by the innate sweetness of her disposition, many, shaking their heads over her, wondered if "anything should happen" what would become of poor little Janet. For everybody about was entirely acquainted with her situation, and knew that Miss Phillipson's money was partly an annuity and partly a charge upon her brother, who had inherited his father's property with its burdens. Unless, therefore, Miss Phillipson had been able to make important savings, which nobody believed, there was absolutely nothing to leave to Janet. The poor little thing must be thrown on the world—she tenderly nurtured, accustomed to all the sweetmesses of life. There could be no doubt that for once in a way these good neighbours had a good reason for shaking their heads. Various hints as to the necessity of making some provision for Janet had been thrown out from time to time by Miss Phillipson's friends, but she had taken it very lightly, expecting, it was supposed, an early marriage for Janet, or that she herself should live for ever. A woman with an annuity is generally very long-lived. Perhaps it was natural that poor Miss Phillipson should expect to be like the rest of her kind. But, indeed, it was not that she indulged in any such expectation, but that she did not think at all. She laid by a few pounds while the impression lasted of what had been said to her, but after all her income was not a large one, and where life is arranged upon a certain scale, and one has just enough to carry that on pleasantly, it is very hard except on the strongest of compulsions, to change it. And there was no such compulsion. Things went very pleasantly at Rosa Cottage, and Miss Phillipson saw no reason why she should think of dying. At fifty she was as well as she had ever been, and at that time of life, almost less than twenty, does one like to have the possibility of dying thrust in one's face.

But now this unlooked-for contingency had arrived, and the doctor having left her very ill and despondent, the Vicar was now going to try, as the doctor said, his kind of medicaments. Rosa Cottage was not like itself when Mr. Bland went in. A bowl of roses in the little hall, where the flowers were generally renewed so punctually and as fresh as the morning, had all fallen to pieces, and the pink and white petals had dropped about the hall table in a careless way which would have vexed Miss Phillipson's soul had she seen it; but Janet, as was natural, had no thought for the flowers when her aunt was so ill. She came to the Vicar on the points of her toes, elaborately quiet, though the sick room was at the back of the house, and it was impossible the patient could hear.

"She is no better to-day? I have just seen Dr. Harding."

"No better! and oh! Mr. Bland, so sad. Couldn't you do something to make her a little happier? I am sure it would do her good. I am sure she would recover if she were not so sad."

"I am afraid it is partly about you, my poor little Janet."

"Why should it be about me? There is no fear of me. I shall be sure to get something to do, or, at all events, I'll do something," cried Janet, with tearful eyes. "But it is not that. I think she's afraid of dying; she lies and moans, and then she will clutch me by the hand as if I could keep her. Oh, please, Mr. Bland, do something to make her happier. If her mind was easier she would perhaps get well."

"I think so too," said the Vicar; and he went softly up the thickly-carpeted stairs to the room in which the mistress of the house was lying. It was the most comfortable house; small, but full of every little luxury that ingenuity could devise; so clean that it looked as if it had been newly painted and papered and carpeted every day; not a speck of dust to be seen and not a corner that was not filled with conveniences—the draughts kept out and the air let in—shaded from the sun, sheltered from the wind—everything done that could be done to secure the comfort of the inhabitants. It was no wonderful, perhaps, that a woman who had surrounded herself with all these luxuries should dislike the thought of going away from them into an entirely unknown place, where, perhaps, the unclothed spirit might shiver in the keenness of too otherworldly atmosphere, and where it was difficult to get over an association with damp earth and the damp grass. The sick room was darkened and for the first moment, coming out of the broad sunshine, it was difficult to see clearly; but the faint little moans proceeding from the white bed indicated where the sufferer lay. The Vicar had a small well-worn book in his hand, but he did not open it when he sat down by the bed. "How are you?" he said, "not any better; but at least not any worse."

"Oh, Vicar, I think I would rather be worse at once and get done with it. What's so dreadful is to lie and think how one will feel—and wonder when it will come—and think—think of nothing but that."

"Of nothing but what?"

She made no answer, but looked at him with wide strained eyes.

"I allow," he said, "my dear lady, that to leave your pretty house and all your pleasant things, and to go to something which is at least, if nothing else, quite new and little known, is a thing to make anyone nervous. If it were only going to Australia it would be nervous work; but if you were going to dear friends there—and knew that they would take every care of you——"

"Oh, if that were all; but when one thinks that one has been a sinner, and that it's all written down up there; all one's tempers, and silly words; and when one has forgotten one's prayers, and all that——"

The Vicar laughed softly, a sound that seemed very strange in that room, and which made poor Miss Phillipson turn her strained eyes upon him with a look of horror.

"Do you think I am a better man than God is?" he said.

"Oh, Mr. Bland, you do say such dreadful things! Aren't you afraid of fire coming down from Heaven?"

"Not a bit," said the Vicar. "Do you think if your father were out in Australia, as we were saying, that when he came to meet you he would fling all your little tempers and all your nonsense as a girl in your face? No more than I should. And if I can smile at them, how much more the Father in heaven who knows all!"

"Oh, Mr. Bland, smile! God!"

"I won't say laugh because it sounds profane, and like a man—though I don't know why. Do you think the little children had never been naughty whom the Lord forbade to be kept from Him. And are not we all little children to Him? Well, let's be profane. I could imagine that it would be a kind of joke in heaven if some poor little pilgrim were frightened to see her Father because she had sometimes forgotten her prayers."

"Oh, Mr. Bland," said the sick woman with a gasp.

"And very self-conceited," continued the Vicar. "Now I have come to prescribe for you, Miss Phillipson. You take Dr. Harding's physics, will you take mine?"

She did not make any answer, but continued to gaze at him, half with horror, half with hope.

"I think they may delay this departure you are so frightened for, if you will honestly take them," he said. She put out her thin hand and laid it eagerly upon his arm.

"My first prescription is that you should forget all about it."



"YOU ARE THE MARRAGEABLE MAN OF THE PARISH."

"Forget! Oh, Mr. Bland, when it's my first duty—my awful duty—to prepare to meet——"

"Your Father," said the Vicar, "and not I hope in a fit of terror. But I think as it is He who is sending for you you may safely trust Him to make all the arrangements for your journey. I want you to put it out of your mind."

Once more she made no reply, but by a gasp of consternation and alarm.

"You can do it if you please," he said, "forget it, talk no more of it, think about other things. Don't think about yourself at all. When you're pretty comfortable, be pretty comfortable, and don't keep thinking in another moment the pain will come back. Ah yes, I know my medicines are harder to take than Dr. Harding's. But I'll promise you if you take them you will have a much better chance. Come, say you will try."

"I will—try," said the sufferer. "Mr. Bland, you're a clergyman, you wouldn't deceive me. You wouldn't lead me out of the right way."

"I want you to take the way I am in myself," he said cheerfully.

"Now you shall tell me to-morrow morning whether you don't feel much better; and I'll come again for some more talk."

CHAPTER II.

THE Vicar went away with a cheerful face, and Miss Phillipson lay on her bed and thought. She was vaguely cheered and yet frightened, not able to believe that it might not perhaps be worse for her to forget for a moment that she was dying, to think of anything else, and yet with a kind of faith in the clergymen that what he said must be right. She began to think of her own father,

but that did not give her much consolation; for her father had been a man of high temper, and easily irritated with his children. And then her mind turned to little Janet. It had often been her boast that she understood how mothers felt, being so fond of speaking, a mother to Janet. She asked herself what her own state of mind had been in respect to the child's shortcomings, and she was aware of having been often angry, and ever returning again and again to Janet's faults, scolding, sometimes nagging, not dismissing the matter. There had been a certain pleasure, though she would not acknowledge that, in keeping it up, in giving another and another prick, especially when the girl began to forget and expected no more reproof; but to do her any real harm, to exact any lengthened punishment—oh, no, no! Miss Philipson said to herself; even when she scolded she had frequent compunctions—but hard words break no bones, and Janet had never seemed to feel it very much. But to punish her for those peccadilloes—oh, no, no; that was a thing Miss Philipson felt herself quite incapable of doing. If the child came home after an absence she would not, as the vicar said, fling them in her face—no, no! Mr. Bland was quite right so far as that was concerned. That dared the reason from her own feeling as to what God would do? This dread thought sent the brain of the sick woman whirling. She was only a weak woman, and fond of the child; but God? There began to dawn upon her strange visions, question and response carried on within herself. How difficult it was to think, to remember things that had been said in sermons, even things that were in the Bible, 'in the weakness of her being. The vain attempt confused her all the more. And the end was that she fell into a strange daze, such indeed as was not uncommon to her now, in which a half dream mixed itself up with waking thoughts, and strange forms and faces seemed to come and go, looking at her, speaking of her to each other. She woke up from this at last with a sudden start, saying to herself, only aloud, "I want you to forget all about it." For the first minute she could not reflect what it was she was bidden to forget.

"You have had a nice sleep, Aunt Mary. I hope you feel a little better," said a soft voice by her bedside.

"Yes, I feel a little better. I have had a nice sleep," she answered, like someone in a dream.

"I am so glad," said Janet. "You have got back your own voice. Mr. Bland said he was going to give you something that would make you well."

"Did he say that? He would not have said that if he did not believe it," said the patient, doubtful, yet with a gleam of hope.

"What did he give you, Aunt Mary?"

Miss Philipson did not make any immediate reply. She said, after a time, "He wants me to give up thinking about it."

"About what, Aunt Mary?"

"He thinks—that I would never be unkind to you, Janet!"

"Oh, Aunt Mary," cried the girl, "don't let them bother you about me; I'll do very well. We've been always very happy together, dear me."

"About you, Janet?"

"No, no," cried Janet. "You must not think I'll be so helpless. I've got a very good education. I am rather fond of children. I don't mind it at all teaching. Don't think of me; please don't think of me."

The sick woman was conscious of a faint surprise, and then of a faint compunction. She was aware that she had not been thinking of Janet at all; and now the question passed through her mind, Why should she think of Janet—or Janet, who was young and would live, to whom no dreadful thing was going to happen? Other consciousnesses, however, mingled with this, even that of being expected to consider the orphan's prospects (when it was so much more imperative that she should be engrossed by her own!), and to be anxious about Janet, who after all was not her own child, or had any such claim upon her as everybody implied. Even an one's deathbed one must at least keep up the semblance of doing what everybody expects, what is evidently the right thing to do. She did not answer Janet's vehement appeal, not feeling capable of undeviating even Janet by the confession that she had no anxiety about her at all. "The Vicar thinks," she said, after a time, "that if I could stop thinking about it I might perhaps get well after all."

"Oh, do, do!" cried little Janet. "Dear Aunt Mary, that is by far the greatest kindness you can do to me. Get well again! and then there will be no need for thinking. Oh, do, please do! and I'm sure," cried the girl, "that you could, if you would. You have so strong a will! Think only of getting well, dear Aunt Mary, and you will if you try."

"I will try," said the patient. In the confusion of her mind she was half ashamed that Janet should be deceived, and think that it was anxiety for her that troubled her spirit, and at the same time half pleased that she had been able to impress the girl with a sense of her care and love. She began gradually to believe that anxiety had much to do with her own depression, and felt that if she made a great effort and shook it off, she would be better. How easy it is to deceive one's self! When the doctor came in the evening, and found her so much improved, she said to him, with a great air of resolution, "I am afraid I have been very naughty, doctor. I have been thinking so much of poor Janet, and what she will do after I am gone—but Mr. Bland has been here, and he tells me I ought to try to forget it."

"To forget it!" said Dr. Harding. "Well, yes, if you have been troubling about Miss Janet, I think you should, for it can do her no good. And of course everything that depresses your mind is bad for you."

"That is just it," said the patient. "I have made up my mind to think of it no more, to trust her to Providence. It is all I can do."

"Yes, it is all you can do," said the doctor, puzzled. He was scarcely so much impressed as she expected by her magnanimous resolution, and looked little less grave than before; but she felt that she had made a great effort, and no doubt this did her good. She was better next day and for a week or two after, and assured the Vicar when he came that she had taken his advice, would now confide Janet quite cheerfully to the keeping of Providence, and would not fret about her any more: a statement which much puzzled the Vicar, too, who had been very well aware that Miss Philipson's low spirits were entirely caused by her fears for herself. Anyhow, it was a gain to have cheered her and given her hope.

This gain, however, to the patient was balanced by a certain harm to Janet's moral nature which arose from her silent conviction that she counted for very little in the depression or in the renewed courage of her benefactress. The girl had been carried away for the moment, when she had entreated her aunt not to think of her, by an impulse of generosity, and by all the suggestions made around her as to the anxiety poor Miss Philipson must feel in leaving her little companion unprovided for. Janet had for a moment believed that it must be so. But she was very clear-sighted, as young observers so often are, especially in anything that concerns themselves, even our own children finding us out silently in many self-deceptions not always suspected by ourselves; and she very soon discovered that she had made a mistake, and that anxiety for her had very little share in the weight that was upon Miss Philipson's mind. The result of this upon Janet was not so much any reproach to Miss



"HOW ARE YOU?" HE SAID. "NOT ANY BETTER; BUT, AT LEAST, NOT ANY WORSE."

You mustn't be made miserable

Philipson, as a quiet and never expressed conviction that to think of the benefit of others was a very rare sentiment, and that the natural object of solicitude was always one's self. She did not at all blame her Aunt Mary over, for having more or less taken her Janet in, for a moment. She accepted it as the natural and rational condition of affairs. I think of myself, you think of yourself, he thinks of himself, was the verb which Janet conjugated inaudibly, accepting it as the creed of humanity. Perhaps had there not been something in her own nature akin to this she would not have been so rapidly convinced. But, on the other hand, it had always been apparent to the quick-witted girl that she was herself much more an object of amusement and occupation to Miss Philipson than an object of love. She had been the elder lady's doll, her toy, a thing to supply a little pleasant occupation for her time and taste. Janet did not blame her, but neither did she feel tempted to repay the cares which had this object by warm human love. A girl of a different kind would never have made a question on the subject, but have taken the love, the most natural of bonds, for granted. But Janet did not do so. She received a permanent twist in her mind, a turn towards the least favourable side of human nature. She did not at all show it, nor did it really influence her conduct as long as she was in the position of a daughter in this poor lady's house. She had enough of the habitual affection of kindred and of use and wont to be affectionate and anxious as other girls are when the head of a house is very ill and dying. It was afterwards, when the unexpressed feelings in her mind took shape and clearness, that she felt the chill, which being not congenial to her nature, crept through her constitution without much affecting her comfort or wounding her heart.

The partial recovery produced by the raising of Miss Philipson's spirits and the relief of her mind lasted through the summer; but when the chills of winter came back the poor lady died, and Janet was left destitute, or nearly so. The change on Rose Cottage was less place, with all the anatomy of the bare branches of the creepers showing against its dark brick walls, was melancholy enough; but it was more melancholy still, when, the remains of its mistress laid in the churchyard—it was thrown open one November day to all the neighbourhood; rude men with muddy feet tearing the long branches of the roses; and all the pretty furniture, every beloved knick-knack, turned out of its long familiar corner and put up to be examined and bid for—by grimy brokers who had gathered from all quarters like vultures—and what was perhaps worse, kind friends all intent upon a bargain. Janet, in her fresh mourning (there had been great discussions as to how much crapes she ought to have on her best dress, as she was not really a niece, but only a cousin once removed), who had been taken to the Vicarage while all the affairs were settled, could not help hearing little whispers now and then of things which various ladies would like to have, things which they had always admired, if the price was not run up too high by the brokers; and one lady even came in to the Vicarage to try in high exultation because she had managed to secure a curious chair for an old song, as she said. Mrs. Bland, the kind Vicaress, said "Hash!" and the poor lady looked very guilty; but there was no doubt that she was in high spirits over her bargain, though Miss Philipson had been a great friend. "Of course," she said in subdued tones, when she was advertised of Janet's presence, "I shall always prize it as a memorial of our poor dear neighbour. How we shall miss her!"

"Yes, we shall miss her," said the Vicaress, "but it must always be hard to see the things you have known all your life dispersed in this way."

"Oh, very hard," everybody assented; and no one was surprised to see the little girl in mourning disappear out of the room. Janet cried a little when she was alone, but she soon dried her tears, and the reflection that Aunt Mary herself was very fond of a bargain at a sale, and that there was nothing in the world that excited her more than to attend an auction at a house in the neighbourhood, had a very composing if not cheering effect upon her mind. Aunt Mary would have gone to Mrs. Woodford's sale (that was the name of the lady who had got the bargain) with much satisfaction; indeed, Janet felt that she knew, if that good woman had gone first, the very thing Aunt Mary would have liked to get. She did not say this, but it added unconsciously to that little stock of dreary wisdom which she was accumulating in her heart. In the drawing-room, in the meantime, the ladies were full of compunctions, and very sorry that they had forgotten that poor little Janet was there. And what was she going to do, poor thing? they all asked. Mr. Philipson had come to attend the funeral and to make arrangements about the sale, but he said at once that he had never approved of his sister's action in burdening herself with a poor relation, and had not the least intention of doing anything for Janet. And it had still to be decided what was the next step to be taken, and what it would be best for her to do.

CHAPTER III.

JANET, however, had made up her mind very distinctly as to what she meant to do. She showed herself a most sensible and self-controlled little person, to the admiration of the Vicarage and all surrounding it. When the good Vicar cleared his throat and began to say to her, with many hums and haws, that he hoped, and Mrs. Bland hoped, that she would always consider the Vicarage as her home, and come to them whenever she pleased, yet that for her own sake—the gentle old man found it very difficult to get it out.

"I know very well what you mean, dear Mr. Bland," said Janet. "You would like to say that you would keep me here, and make everything pleasant for me, but that for my own sake I ought to get something to do. You are quite right. I must be independent; though to have such friends as Mrs. Bland and you will be everything for me. What I want is to be a governess."

"Janet, my dear, I don't know anything better to suggest; but it is often a hard life."

"I don't think it will be for me; I have great confidence in it. And it will be something quite new, which is always a good thing."

"Do you think it is always a good thing? I am not quite sure."

"Oh, yes," cried Janet, with a sparkle in her eyes: "other things are so monotonous; but to go and live in a strange house, with quite new people, all strange and exciting—"

"My poor child," said the good Vicar, "I am afraid you don't know what you are saying. Governesses are seldom happy. They have a great deal to put up with; and how will you like a girl like you, that has always been so petted and taken care of?"

"I shall not mind at all," said Janet, "I shall make up my mind to it. I am very fond of novelty, and something that is quite new, that I have never tried before, is just what I shall like. I saw an advertisement in the papers this morning."

"What is it, my dear? Show it to me." The Vicar, perhaps, liked novelty too.

She ran and fetched him the *Guardian*—his own paper, in which everything to a clergyman has a peculiar sanction, the protection of the Church being over all. And there Mr. Bland, putting on his spectacles, read that a lady required a young lady to carry on the studies of her daughter, aged fourteen, no other children in the family, and every effort made to make the governess happy and comfortable; apply to Mrs. R. H., at a certain address, Maida Vale. "N.B.—A recommendation from a clergyman would be greatly prized."

"A recommendation from a clergyman! Well, Janet, I confess that looks as if it were made for you. But do you think you could manage a girl of fourteen? You are only nineteen yourself."

"I shall be twenty next birthday; and you might say 'in her twentieth year'—that sounds better than nineteen. Oh, I think I can see it," said Janet: "a nice woman in a widow's cap."

"How do you know she will be a widow?"

"Oh, I am sure she must be; and a nice girl who will be like a young sister. I have always thought I should like to have a little sister. And Maida Vale is in London, isn't it?—near the exhibitions; and sometimes, perhaps, she would take us to the theatre."

"Janet," said Mrs. Bland, in a horrified tone, "don't forget your mourning."

"Oh, that would not happen all in a moment," said the girl, "it would take some time to make friends, and to get them to like me."

"But suppose," said Mrs. Bland, "which is far more likely, that



"JANET, STANDING OPPOSITE TO HIM, AMAZED, HAD AN ALMOST CONVULSIVE IMPULSE TO BURST INTO A LAUGH."

they went to all the exhibitions and fine sights themselves, and left you behind. That is how the governess is generally treated."

"They will not treat me like that," said Janet, "oh, not this nice Mrs. H. R. She says she will make the governess comfortable and happy. If Mr. Bland will only write for me."

"Of course I shall write for you, Janet; and if they go by my recommendation—"

"I know I shall get it," said Janet, clasping her hands.

"But Janet ought to be warned, my dear, that really, really it is not a happy life," said the Vicar's wife.

But Janet would not be warned. She said, with the most admirable good sense, that it was the only thing she could do, and that she was sure she could do it; that if they were nice she would like them very much, and if they were nasty she could try to get another situation; and that in the meantime there was nothing else to be done. Half reluctant and half excited by her excitement, the Vicar wrote to Mrs. R. H. He told her Janet's piteous little story—how she was an orphan and alone in the world, but how she was beloved in the place where she had spent her innocent little life, and how in his house she would always find a home. In reality Mr. Bland was well enough aware that Janet had a few faults, but in the enthusiasm of his kindness he made it appear that she was an example of all the virtues, as well as a helpless and desolate little orphan girl, with a good knowledge of music, and able to instruct in French and the rudiments of German. These matters he took in faith from her own assurance, although indeed the good vicar knew for certain that Janet with Miss Philipson had once passed a winter abroad.

The answer was awaited with great anxiety, not only in the Vicarage, but throughout the parish, where opinions were divided

as to the success of the experiment. "She will be back at the Vicarage before three months are out," said one. "She will never get on among strangers," cried another, "and as for teaching a girl of fourteen—she does not look much more than fourteen herself." "I hope the good Blanks may not find her on their hands permanently," said a third. The Doctor happened to be present when one of these conversations was going, and he frowned upon the ladies, even more than he generally frowned. "Do you think Janet Summerhayes is fit to be a governess, Dr. Harding?" they said.

"No, I don't," said the Doctor; as if it was their fault, the ladies said. "I think no girl is fit to be a governess the way you ladies use them—shutting them up in a school-room, confining them to the company of your babies, wearing their poor little hearts out. Do you think a girl does not want a little fun, a little movement, because she happens to be a governess? Oh, you may laugh; but I am a medical man, and I can't look on calmly like you."

He went off puffing and snorting (the ladies said, like a steam-engine). Of course he was very unjust with his sweeping way of talking, as if people were cruel because they wished those they employed to do what they were engaged for. The doctor was much put out and fiercer than usual. He said to himself, "Poor little lamb," and "Shame!" and "What do they care?" discharging these exclamations into the air as if he were firing-off pistols. He had been strongly against the governess scheme from the first; but when he was asked what then the poor girl was to do, he was not ready with any reply. He met her now, as it happened, as he crossed the village green full of indignation and wrath—or, at least, he saw her before him moving along in the panoply of mourning: for indeed Janet had insisted upon crepe, and a great deal of it, and had succeeded in getting that dismal finery to her heart's desire. She who had never been seen in anything but trim straight dresses of the most girlish construction, was almost imposing in her mourning; her light figure weighed down by the amplitude of the crepe trimming, and the length of the skirt. She had a veil over her face, a veil of tulle, with a heavy border of crepe. Poor little Janet, she was an image of woe moving along in all those strange trappings across the village green. She did not see the Doctor, but the Doctor saw her; and, after a sudden start and pause, hurried on to overtake her. He had stopped himself as if he meant to reflect upon something—then finding presumably that his powers of reflection were not sufficient for the emergency, hurried on. When he came near enough he called to her, and Janet stopped at once and waited for him to come up. As he approached she threw back her veil, and there suddenly appeared a bright little countenance full of smiles, and quite out of accord with the crepe.

"Are you going home, Miss Janet?" he said.

"I am going to the Vicarage, Dr. Harding, which is home at present."

"Why can't you let it be home for the winter?" said the doctor; "time enough then to make any change. And why do you wear that dreadful crepe?" he added, with a burst of impatience; "that surely is quite unnecessary."

"Indeed, it is no more than proper respect," said Janet, "when you think what *she* was to me."

"I know all about that; but had she been your mother what would be the use of all this stuff?" The doctor took between his finger and thumb contemptuously a fold of the stuff which he objected to. "For an old woman it may pass, but for a child like you it's an absurdity; and so is this going away."

"Oh, no!" said Janet; "the Vicar himself thought it was for my good."

"Confound the Vicar," murmured Dr. Harding under his breath; but then he added, "He's everything that's good; but he lives so much among old women that he's got a little like them. They all say, don't they, that no life can be depended upon, and that it will be better for you to trust to nobody but yourself?"

Janet laughed; but she said, "That is the one point upon which we agree. I must trust to nobody but myself."

"Nonsense," the Doctor said, almost angrily. "Why couldn't you hold on till the end of the winter? It would be a good thing for them both to have you, and perhaps save Mrs. Bland an illness. And here you are going away for no reason."

"A reason which is above everything," said Janet. "I must; why should you try to make me think that I can do what I please when you know I can't?"

"You may certainly do what you please—for six months at least; everybody, anybody would be glad to have you. I say only till this winter's over. Between that time and this many things may happen."

"Ah, yes!" said Janet. "Six months ago I had poor Aunt Mary to think of. I must not get another home, and then have to break my heart leaving it again."

A little tear came into the corner of Janet's eye. The doctor knew very well that there was no heartbreak in the matter, but still a tear in a girl's eye is very pathetic, and so was the fact that a little thing like that, not much more than a child, was going out from all she knew and cared for, to confront the world alone. The doctor looked before him and behind him, and saw nobody who could interrupt this tête-à-tête. They had turned into a lane which led to the vicarage, and in the fading of the wintry afternoon there was not a soul to be seen.

"Janet," he said, laying his hand on her arm, "I daresay you think me quite an old man—"

"Oh no," said Janet, lifting to him the eyes of which she made so much innocent and natural use—very clear brown eyes, full of life, which she opened wide when she looked at you with a tender ingenuous interest which captivated most people. "Oh no," she said. "I am sure you are much younger than anybody else—here—"

"And besides," he added, scarcely pausing for her answer, with

a haste and excitement which parched his lips, "a mere country doctor in a poor little village."

"Don't speak so, Dr. Harding; there is nobody so well known or so much trusted as you—"

"But," he said, always with that air of hurrying on, "I could give you a comfortable home, my dear. I could take care of you—I could keep you safe—from all the troubles that lie outside—in life—"

"Dr. Harding," cried Janet, her eyes growing bigger than ever—"but! Why you are not even married! How could I live with you?"

"Janet, my little girl, don't laugh at me. I have known you almost all your life. Only as my wife, my dear; only as my wife!"

He was an elderly man, no doubt, and not beautiful, but he was quivering with excitement, and as much impassioned as it is ever given to an Englishman to be. Janet, standing opposite to him, amazed, had an almost convulsive impulse to burst into a laugh. But she restrained it, holding herself fast.

"Dear Dr. Harding; how good you are," she said; "but you don't fancy I would take advantage of you like that."

"Take advantage of me! You are mistaken, my dear; you are quite mistaken. It is taking no advantage. It would be the happiest thing in the world for me. Janet, if Miss Philipson perturbed and spoiled you, I'll do it still more; and I can provide for you, my dear, when I die."

"You never approved of Aunt Mary because of her spoiling me, Dr. Harding."

"Ah! but this would be a different thing, a very different thing! Janet, you will take all the sunshine out of this place if you go away. I can't face the thought of your going away. Stay with me; stay with me, my dear!"

"Oh, Dr. Harding!" cried Janet. She was half crying, which was partly from suppressed laughter, and partly from a touch of gratitude and pity for his excitement. "I can't; I can't!" she cried; "and Mrs. Bland would never let me, you know."

"Mrs. Bland has nothing to do with it," he said; but the name startled him, and a sudden pallor of consternation came over his flushed face. The dreadful thought had flashed across him what people would say. The Vicar, his old friend, the Vicaress who never disliked to raise a laugh against the doctor; and all the people round who had jeered at him as an old bachelor, how much more would they jeer at Benedict the married man! But, to do him justice,

though this reflection was terrible, it was but momentary. He added with vigour, "What has anyone to do with it? My dear, if you'll trust yourself to me you shall have everything you can wish for. I'm not very rich, but I've enough for that, and I can provide for you when I die."

"Dear Dr. Harding! I can't, I can't. Oh, don't say any more. I love you dearly," cried little Janet; "you are the best man that ever was; but what you say would never do. You know yourself it would never do."

"What is it that would never do, Janet?" said the Vicar's calm voice over the hedge. Fortunately he did not see the pair for a moment longer, during which Janet, at least, had entirely recovered any discomposure which this explosion had produced on her.

"It is only that Dr. Harding thinks I had better let the winter pass before I go to my situation," said Janet, sedately. "But I say it is far better to do it at once and get it over, for every day I stayed would make it more hard to go."

"The child is right, Harding," said the Vicar. "I wish she would take your advice, but yet I can't help feeling she is right. If 'tis done when 'tis done, then it were well it were done quickly. It would only prolong the agony to be looking forward to it all the winter. I think the child is right."

"Well," said the doctor, gruffly, "I see you are all in a tale. No, I have no time to come in. Good-bye, Miss Janet, if that is your last word."

"Good-bye, dear Dr. Harding," she said, holding out her hand; but he scarcely touched it as he hurried away.

"He has not much manners, my dear," said the Vicar, looking after him. "I wish he were not so rude; but he means very well all the same."

It is grievous to have to say that when Janet got to her room to take off her hat, she laughed till the tears streamed from her eyes. The situation was so ludicrous that she could not stop laughing. Poor old doctor, how funny he looked! And she settled that evening with Mrs. R. H., who turned out to be Mrs. Randolph Harwood, a widow, with two daughters and a son, living in a pretty house in the district known as St. John's Wood. There are two St. John's Woods—one which is the height of respectability, one which is—not. It is needless to say that Mrs. Harwood was everything that the strictest clergyman could desire, and that she found the vicar's recommendation quite satisfactory. Thus the first little chapter of the life of Janet Summerhayes, or rather the preface—the prologue to that not uneventful existence—was completed. What she met with in the house in St. John's Wood, and all the new persons that were to influence and shape her existence then, and the occurrences which awaited her, now remain to be told.



SHE LAUGHED TILL THE TEARS STREAMED FROM HER EYES.